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## Basic research and the search for cures

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Two interesting reports today discuss the relationship between basic research and the kind of translational research that is the most visible sign of progress toward cures.

In his blog, the director of the bay area biotech collaborative QB3 Regis Kelly writes about public speakers at the Translational Medicine Alliance speaking out against basic research. He says:

“ Repeatedly mentioned with disdain was the amount of money that went into R01 grants, the single investigator grants that are the backbone of fundamental research in the US. Over 80% of the grants go to R01s, it was said, while only 2 to 5% go to translational research, the mantra of the meeting participants.

This is the same type of research funded by CIRM's Basic Biology Awards and in some New Faculty Awards. The basic discoveries that come out of this kind of research are considered to be the fuel in the pipeline leading to new cures: No new ideas? No new therapies.

Kelly advocates rather than ignoring the complaints, "put our house in order and mount a major public education campaign to validate our position." That is, do what can be done to make basic research as efficient and effective as possible then explain to members of the public just what they are getting for their money.

“ Or we can discount the criticisms as uninformed foolishness, and do nothing. That could be suicidal!

Kelly's point is a good one. Most people have at least one friend or family member with a critical disease, and those people want to see new cures coming from publically funded research. Until the relationship between basic research and new cures is made clearer people will likely continue pushing for less basic research.

While Kelly defends basic research, the head of the National Cancer Institute Harold Varmus held a brainstorming session to figure out the basic questions in cancer research. According to Science magazine:

“ Once the list is finished, Varmus might hold a special competition to invite proposals for several questions and fund, say, 15 of the best ideas. Research funding may be tight, but "we've got over a \$5 billion budget," Varmus says. Nothing has been decided, though. Right now, he says, "we're just trying to have a conversation that evolves into something useful."

Stanford's Irv Weissman, who was at Varmus' session, gave an excellent talk to the CIRM governing board about the value of basic research. In his case, it was a basic discovery about stem cell biology that led to cancer research that's now moving toward the clinic.

Tags: Cancer, Stanford University, Kelly, QB3, Weissman

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